One God, one Lord

by Nicholas Thomas Wright in the November 27, 2013 issue

How does a follower of Jesus live within the world of pagan culture? Paul bases his (thoroughly Jewish) answer on the meaning of monotheism, a monotheism that is both creational and cultic. In 1 Corinthians, chapters six through eight, he insists on the goodness of the present creation and also on the need to be sure one is worshiping the One God and him alone, avoiding the snares of pagan idolatry wherever they may appear.

The whole passage is eschatological. The church is the people “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (10:11). The passage evokes the great Exodus narrative: it is in the context of the Exodus, the wilderness journeys and the anticipated entry into the “inheritance” that the Pentateuch provides the prayer which summed up what monotheism meant for Jews in the ancient world and to this day. It is a prayer of loyalty to the One God when surrounded by pagan temptations. The prayer of Deuteronomy 6:4 known as the Shema (“Hear”) is dense and notoriously difficult to translate (just as Paul’s reformulation of it is dense and resists easy rendering):

> Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone. You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

This is the natural place for a first-century Jew to begin when thinking of how one should behave within a surrounding pagan culture.

This passage must have been dear to Saul of Tarsus. But what Paul the apostle—or someone else before him—has done with this famous prayer is utterly breathtaking. This central, decisive, sharply focused prayer of loyalty to the One God has been restated so as to include Jesus at its very heart: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6).

The Shema was central for second-temple Jewish monotheists. It was an acted sign that spoke of this monotheism not as an abstract dogma but as the deeply personal reality that evoked the deeply personal response of prayer, love and allegiance. Personal—but also cosmic.

To pray the Shema was to embrace the yoke of God’s kingdom, to commit oneself to God’s purposes on earth as in heaven, whatever it might cost. It was to invoke and declare one’s loyalty to the One God who had revealed himself in action at the Exodus and was now giving his people their inheritance.

Paul uses the Shema in this passage in exactly this way not as a detached statement of a dogma, not as a spiritual aside, not simply in order to swat away the many gods and many lords of the previous verse, but as the foundation for the community which must live as the kingdom people in the midst of the pagan world.

But the Shema here is the redefined Shema. It has Jesus, and not least the crucified Jesus, at its center. The cross is not mentioned explicitly in the revised prayer, but as soon as Paul applies the point it becomes apparent that he is assuming it’s there. The underlying meaning should be clear, once we recognize the Exodus context of the original prayer and the new Exodus context of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians, chapters eight to ten. Just as the Exodus was launched by Israel’s God coming in person to rescue his people, so the new Exodus has been launched by the long-awaited return of this same God in and as Jesus himself.

Paul is invoking the central but usually ignored theme of the long-awaited return of Israel’s God to Zion. He uses the Shema here not as a detached dogmatic aside or maxim to be drawn on in a pragmatic ethical argument, but as a statement of eschatological and monotheistic divine identity. This is what it looked like when Israel’s God came back at last.

The Greek form of the Shema in the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 6:4, which Jews across the Diaspora would say day by day, is this:

> *akoue Israēl*
> *kyrios ho theos hēmon*
> *kyrios heis estin.*
>
> Hear, Israel
> YHWH our God
> YHWH is one.

And the prayer continues, "And you shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your *psychē*, and with all your power."

Faced with a classic question about how to navigate the choppy waters of a pagan environment with its idols and temples, the obvious place to start for Paul is with second-temple monotheism; and one of the easiest ways of referring to that belief would be by referring to the Shema. The basic point for a Jesus follower in a world full of idols was simple: "We are monotheists, not pagan polytheists."

The Shema-based allusions and echoes gather momentum from three verses back. First, "if anybody loves God" (1 Cor., v. 3); then "no God but one" (v. 4); then, as the rhetorical climax, verses 5 and 6.

So when it comes to food that has been offered to idols, we know that "idols are nothing in the world" and that "there is no God but one." Yes, indeed: there may be many so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth. But for us

> There is one God the father,
> from whom are all things, and we to him;
> and one lord, Jesus the Messiah,
> through whom are all things, and we through him.

This is dense. There are no verbs in the original formula, but Paul and his hearers would hardly need them. They would understand it to read: "There is one God the father, from whom *are* all things and we *are* to him, and one lord Jesus Messiah, through whom *are* all things and we *are* through him."

Even that might be thought obscure. Perhaps we should gloss the first phrase with "and we *belong* to him," though "to him" seems to mean more than

“belonging”—something more like “we exist in relation to him,” “we live toward him.” Perhaps, in the second phrase, we should reckon with something more explicit in relation to the saving work of the Messiah: not just “and we live through him” but “and we have been saved through him.” Or perhaps the formula was meant to remain evocative and mysterious.

The real shock of the passage, though, is simply the inclusion of Jesus within the Shema. The fact that Paul can do what he has done without explanation or justification speaks volumes for the theological revolution that had already taken place, which seems by this stage to be uncontroversially part of the Christian landscape. Paul is going to argue at length for positions that would be difficult and controversial for the Corinthians to grasp; he sees no need to argue for, or even explain any further, the astonishing theological claim of verse 6.

We may even guess that Paul, accustomed since childhood to pray the Shema at regular hours, had himself now been praying it and teaching others to pray it in this new fashion—perhaps for several years, invoking the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah as the present instantiation of the kingdom of God the father, as in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28.

The force of the revision is obvious. What Paul has done (or what someone else has done, which Paul is here quoting) is to separate *theos* and *kyrios*, *God* and *Lord*, in the original prayer, adding brief explanations. A small step for the language, a giant leap for the theology. Jesus is not a “second God”; that would abrogate monotheism entirely. He is not a semidivine intermediate figure. He is the one in whom the identity of Israel’s God is revealed.

The context, and the way the whole discussion flows from here, rubs in the point. In a world of “many gods and many lords,” with idols on every street and “tainted” idol meat in every market, the point of the statement is that “for us there is One.” Throughout the letter, Paul is claiming to be standing on the ground of Jewish-style monotheism over against the pagan world.

There is one God, one Lord—therefore pagan idols, the gods and goddesses in the pantheon (including, of course, the emperor and his family, whose cult was flourishing at Corinth as elsewhere), were nonexistent. The emperors, of course, did “exist.” They were, or had been, people in the real world. The point was that they claimed to be divine but were not so in fact. As “divinities” they were nonexistent.

The result is dramatic: food that has been offered to these nongods and nonlords is simply food. Nothing of major theological, cultic or sociological relevance has actually happened to it. A follower of the One God, One Lord, can eat it with a clear conscience.

Second-temple monotheism, reworked in accordance with the new Exodus belief that Israel's God has returned at last in and as Jesus, anchors the key symbol of Paul's worldview—the single community of the Messiah's followers. The revised Shema sustains both the unity and the holiness of the community.

The starting point, addressing the question of holiness (should one eat "tainted" food?), is that people who understand this robust redefined monotheism can have a clear conscience in eating anything they like. The "gods" are hollow nonentities; don't worry about them. Holiness will not be compromised if you eat.

But what about unity? What about those whose conscience is not yet clear on these matters but is rather, in Paul's manner of speaking, "weak"? And what about those with a "strong" conscience who find themselves in the same community as the "weak"?

Answer: think through what it means that the monotheism upon which the worldview now rests has the crucified Messiah at its center. As in Philippians 2, the cross stands at the heart of the revelation of the One God, and hence at the heart of the worldview. If, on the basis of this rediscovered monotheism, believers go ahead and eat despite the scruples of the person with a "weak conscience," they will be spurning the very inner nature of that same monotheism.

The Messiah's death is thus not simply a convenient way for God to deal with sins. It reflects the heart and character of the one true God, and that reflection must shine through the life of the community that invokes this One God, One Lord. Otherwise, if you with knowledge of this One God, One Lord, go ahead and eat despite the weaker fellow believer, you may encourage such a person to go back into idolatry.

The revolution in theology is thus not simply the inclusion of Jesus within the Shema but the inclusion of the crucified Messiah at that point. Here is the ultimate scandal, as in 1 Corinthians 1:23. Not to recognize this point and not to act upon it will be the new scandal, the thing that will trip up the "weaker sibling."

Choose your scandal, Paul seems to say: either the scandal of a crucified Messiah or the scandal of a destroyed fellow believer. The cross at the heart of God means the cross at the heart of the worldview symbol which is the united and holy family itself. All this follows directly from the belief in inaugurated eschatological monotheism, the belief that Israel's God has returned in the person of Jesus.

This vital move, the direct consequence of the revised Shema, does not leave behind the Jewish context in which to pray the Shema is to invoke and commit oneself to God's kingdom. In the very similar passage in Romans 14:17–18, where Paul has once again been using an essentially monotheistic argument to ground his appeal to regard food, drink and holy days as "things indifferent," he explains: God's kingdom, you see, isn't about food and drink but about justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Anyone who serves the Messiah like this pleases God and deserves respect from other people.

Paul sees the community of those who live by the rule of the One God, One Lord—the community of the crucified Messiah, defined by him in his death and resurrection (Rom. 14:9)—as the community in and through whom God's sovereign rule is coming to birth. To pray the revised Shema, just as much as the ancient one, was to take upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom.

For Paul, those who pray this revised Shema are committed to the sovereign rule of the one true God coming true through the victory of Jesus the Messiah on the cross in the past, and through the victory he will win over all enemies, including death itself, in the future (1 Cor. 15:20–28). In between those two victories, however, there will be a third: the quiet but significant victory in which members of his family learn to live not by insisting on their rights but by looking out for one another's needs and consciences. This is how the community will learn to live together as the united and holy people of God, which is Paul's principal aim at so many points: by the prayerful understanding, with renewed minds, of the identity of the One God, One Lord.

Paul spends chapter 9 explaining his own apostolic practice of "freedom," of knowing what his "rights" are and then not insisting on them, in order to ground his appeal to the "strong" that they should not insist on theirs. He then moves, in chapter 10, to a serious warning against idolatry—perhaps knowing that some will be tempted to say that they are strong because they want to be allowed to flirt once more with idolatry and the behavior that goes with it.

Not so, he says: you are the new Exodus people (1 Cor. 10:1–13), the people upon whom “the ends of the ages have met” (10:11). You must learn from the mistakes of the first Exodus people. Thus, for the strong as well, there must be none of the false logic that draws from monotheism the conclusion that, since idols don’t exist, one might as well visit their temples from time to time. Paul does not draw back an inch from his basic principle, which he grounds in scripture: “The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord.” The opening line of Psalm 24 gives as clear a statement of creational monotheism as one could wish, providing unambiguous permission to “eat whatever is sold in the market without making any judgments on the basis of conscience” (1 Cor. 10:25).

But there is more to this quotation than meets the eye. The Psalm is not just a statement about the fact that the Lord, having made all things, now owns all things, so that his people can enjoy them. It is a strong appeal for monotheistic worship and holiness of life, focused on access to the Temple:

> Who shall ascend the hill of YHWH? Who shall stand in his holy place?
> Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. (Ps. 24:3–4)

“Lift[ing] up their souls to what is false”: in other words, to idols, false divinities. Yes, we hear as Paul quotes the first verse: monotheism means that the Lord owns all things and gives them freely to you. But this also means that you must worship him alone and that you must abjure the behavior that idolatry awakens.

Those who follow the Psalmist’s call to monotheistic holiness “will receive blessing from YHWH, and vindication from the God of their salvation” (Ps. 24:5). Paul has already spoken of the key motivation for avoiding idolatry: we are the people who eat and drink at the table of the Messiah, and we must not simultaneously share the table of demons. The way he makes this point in 1 Corinthians (16–17) provides another echo of the Psalm:

> The cup of blessing which we bless is a sharing in the Messiah’s blood, isn’t it? The bread we break is a sharing in the Messiah’s body, isn’t it? There is one loaf; well, then, there may be several of us, but we are one body, because we all share the one loaf.

The *blessing* is the thing, and one must not trample upon it.

The cultic setting of the Psalm, with the cleansing of hands and heart in order to share in the worship, is matched exactly by Paul's appeal. He has not abandoned the Jewish call for holiness; he has merely redefined it. Nor need we be in doubt as to how, at least in 1 Corinthians, Paul would have understood the closing verses of the Psalm:

> Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the king of glory may come in.
> Who is the king of glory?
> YHWH, strong and mighty, YHWH, mighty in battle.

The king of glory who, mighty in battle, has now entered into the place where earth and heaven meet and who is celebrated as such by his followers—this king, Paul would have said, is Jesus the Messiah. He is the one, mighty in battle, who has won the initial victory and will go on to win the final one (1 Cor. 15:20–28). And this, finally, increases the probability that when Paul quotes Psalm 24:1 in 1 Corinthians 10:26 he understands *kyrios* to refer to Jesus himself.

Paul's entire argument in 1 Corinthians, chapters eight through ten, is rooted in a second-temple monotheism reworked around Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah and reapplied, in the new eschatological situation, to the life of the community that invokes him, that eats at his table, shares his blessing and celebrates his victory. The fresh theology provides the stable basis for a united, holy community, even though that community has none of the regular Jewish worldview symbols on which to rely for support. And that fresh theology—creational, eschatological and cultic monotheism, brought into three dimensions through having the crucified Jesus at its heart—finds its richest and densest expression in Paul's radical revision of the Shema. "For us there is one *theos*, one *kyrios*."

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